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News and Views

from the Farm Management Staff

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
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DOES EDUCATIONAL WORK WITH COMMERCIAL FARMERS REQUIRE
A GROWING ROLE FOR FARM RECORD PROJECTS?

Will the productivity or contribution of future extension programs have a strong relationship to the existence of and quality of farm record programs and/or projects? Using the link in the chain analogy, it appears to us that such projects may be one of the first links. Without record projects will it become more difficult for extension workers to supply relevant data concerning alternatives faced in the fast-moving decision making environment of commercial farmers? Will extension workers lack the entrees needed to reach an audience of individual commercial farmers for educational work without knowledge of data on the total farm business, as well as specific parts within the whole? Is it increasingly necessary that commercial farmers have confidence in the ability of extension workers to help them with the analysis of alternatives faced in major decision-making situations? If so, does this not also provide farmer acceptance for Extension to effectively funnel to him the subject matter pertinent to agricultural production? We feel that the answer to these questions in respect to general direction of extension work over the next 5 to 10 years is yes.

With affirmative answers to the questions above, the strong significance of farm record projects to extension work seems to be a logical conclusion. Extension's challenge appears to us to be threefold, (1) to assist commercial farmers in understanding and using farm record data and analysis as one of their managerial tools, (2) to assist in the development and implementation of institutional organizations that facilitate the keeping and analysis of records, and (3) to organize educational programs and activities which will capitalize on the potential educational avenues opened to us by points (1) and (2).

Farm record projects require heavy amounts of professional resources. However, the financial support needed for these resources could largely come from farmer financing rather than public funds. A number of States have initiated new projects in recent years. Other States have increased the size or number of farmers involved in their projects. This growth in farm record projects has involved use of electronic data processing in some cases but in others the traditional record book system has been used. We hear reports from various regions around the country of voluntarily expressed requests from farmers for record projects. It is our feeling that more commercial farmers are explicitly looking for some managerial guidance from their record data.

We have devoted a portion of this issue specifically to views rather than news. We would be interested in hearing your reactions.

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NEW FARM RECORD PROJECT INITIATED IN KENTUCKY. Some evidence of the growing interest in and usefulness of a farm record project seems to be indicated from the project initiated by Kentucky in 1962 in conjunction with a Farm Business Association. This project is geographically located toward the western part of the State in an area of large Corn Belt-type farms. A summary of the first year's records was completed and in attractive published form by the first part of April. The summary indicates that the average size of farm was 684 acres, with an average capital investment of approximately a quarter of a million dollars. As usual in farm record projects, the income range was quite wide, going from a plus \$28,000 to a minus \$4,000 return to management. (A limited supply of these summaries for the first year's operation of this Kentucky project has been distributed to extension farm management specialists.)

It is our feeling that progress made with this project in the first year of operation indicates some answers and has implications for the possibilities of future extension work with large commercial farms. Most of these farmers had very little experience with record keeping prior to last year and we understand that there was essentially no drop-out for 1963.

DEVELOPMENT OF A COMPREHENSIVE CODING SYSTEM. A coding system which could be adaptable on a national basis is being developed by Dr. Warren Vincent, Michigan State. His objective is to work out a coding system that would make it possible to have a standardized system for the processing and analysis of farm records. Dr. Vincent has been involved in the development and implementation of Michigan's mail-in record project over the past several years. Warren discussed this project at the mail-in farm record seminar held at Michigan State last November 6-8. If you have not received a copy of the proceedings of this seminar you may wish to write to John Doneth.

We feel that a coding system that could be used on a wide-spread basis has potential value for national and regional uses, as well as within States. In order to facilitate the testing of this code under various farm conditions around the country and to speed up its overall development, FES has provided Michigan with some special funds. Warren will probably be working closely with some of you over the next year or so to test the application of this coding system to farms in your States.

MISSOURI PROJECT TO STUDY USES OF ELECTRONIC DATA PROCESSING IN FARM MANAGEMENT DECISION MAKING. The Missouri staff in cooperation with FES is getting under way a study (a) of the possibilities for using EDP, (b) to assist farmers in making specific decisions they individually face, and (c) to explore and develop ways in which EDP may be used in an extension management education program concerning farmer decision making. There has been considerable use of EDP in farm management research over the past decade. Subsequently, we have had a number of developments using EDP in farm record projects in recent years. As these developments in research and record keeping projects have been taking place there has been the question of how can the results be used by Extension, and/or in a practical applied sense by the individual farmer? Further, there is a question of whether EDP may be used as a tool in decision making by the farmer beyond the uses that are being made in research and in record keeping projects. The Missouri project, which is to run over the next 2 years, will seek to delve further into this facet of electronic data processing's role in farm management. Robert Finley and Carroll Kirtley, Missouri staff members, will give leadership to this endeavor.

Very truly yours,

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